

The Art of Living Dangerously

Disaster Tourism
Bronia Iwanczak, Suzanne Treister,
Phillipa Veitch, Gianni Wise
Co-ordinator Bronia Iwanczak

Rubyayre, Sydney
31 May – 16 June

Alex Gawronski

Bronia Iwanczak, *Disaster Tourism*, 2001 Photo courtesy the artist



"Disaster Tourism" is such an evocative title. Its success results from the juxtaposition of inherent contradictions. On the one hand "tourism" conjures all manner of escapist analogy. Coupled with "disaster", the viewer cannot help but imagine the infinitesimally disastrous possibilities opened by travel. Apocalyptic visions of being surprised far from home by circumstances or events, man-made or otherwise, way in excess of our capability to deal with them. This duality extends to the work on show. However, links to the rich vein of poetic and political association promised by the exhibition's title are only partially fulfilled. In fact individual efforts are occasionally undermined by a seemingly paradoxical trepidation. It were as if the show's premise loomed so omnipresently on the horizon that the artists could only begin to scratch its surface.

Entering Rubyayre, the visitor confronts three photographs by *Disaster Tourism's* co-ordinator Bronia Iwanczak. Two images are representations of industrial interiors in an advanced stage of dilapidation. The third is an eerie, mostly empty landscape featuring huge anonymous mounds of earth photographed beneath a rising moon. In fact the general anonymity of the photographic diptych robs it of affective visual power. The interiors seem so generic and so immediately reminiscent of specific genres of post-industrial representation that their capacity to invoke questioning is significantly diminished. On the other hand the third photograph in this series functions oppositionally. The uninformed viewer is unlikely to discern its exact geographic location. Here, however, this sense of placelessness amplifies the works' frames of reference. The environment depicted is arid and devoid of human spectacle. Traces of decay and of extensive corrosive salination lend this utterly immobile landscape a distinctly catastrophic aura. In this instance the disaster has already occurred. The viewer is washed up on the horizon of a deadly future.

Distinct from Iwanczak's photographic exploration is Gianni Wise's collection of forlorn manila folders. These amass on a sagging wooden shelf in piles and bundles. Beneath them are a series of indistinct paper-wrapped packages one can only assume contain food or some other basic human necessity. The folders themselves contain files and personal reminiscences of the two years the artist spent in Chile under the dictatorial reign of Augusto Pinochet. The work therefore evinces a

sense of direct exposure to the disasters of political tyranny. At the same time Wise evokes in his accounts a decidedly self-deprecating humour. The artist recounts attempts to master Spanish while approximating first hand the full extent of the political destruction wreaked by Pinochet's regime.

Worlds removed from Wise's personal interrogations is Phillipa Veitch's vivid drawing in coloured pencil. Combining pop irony with an almost Manga-esque sense of cosmic disturbance, Veitch's work has a hallucinatory quality. The disaster described, although referring to some unspecified military intervention, remains interior and allusive. The work is ostensibly a landscape in which silhouetted soldiers wade through a psychedelic swamp under a fulgurating sky. The formal treatment of sky and water serves to dissociate one from the other as though each were distinctly separate realms. In fact Veitch's drawing conjures memories of full-blown Romanticism and its obsessions with the sublime, the supernatural and the overall subjugation of individual consciousness to the greater Cosmos. Needless to say the Cosmos in this instance is tempered with a knowing, perhaps wistful irony.

Viewed as a whole, *Disaster Tourism* approaches the promise of the many associations it sets in motion. Yet it is an exhibition marked more by difference than by the similarity of individual approaches. This sense of distinctness was probably best encapsulated by Suzanne Treister's installation dominated once again by the artist's alter ego Rosalind Brodsky. Treister presented a table replete with faux-postcards and watercolours of the defunct Soviet East alongside plasticine figurines and even a miniature model surfboard. The multiple and ultimately humorous narratives that inform the work bespeak a disaster of comic proportions. In the end however, the work hovered uneasily between possible readings. Perhaps what we saw was the imaginary private work table of Rosalind Brodsky or a stall at a Ukrainian country fair. The very multiplicity of potential interpretations dissolved the work in indistinctness and chaos however entertaining. This shattering of homogeneity provided tension between works even if aspects appeared superfluous. Such a situation was not improved by the cramped physical confines of Rubyayre. *Disaster Tourism* was ultimately an exhibition ripe with possibility. Given greater scope to move, *Disaster Tourism* promises a wealth of fruitful future incarnations, for as we all know, disaster never ends.

It's not you, it's me

Other Worlds
Maria Bilske, Matthew Bradley, Chris Chapman, Peter Franov,
Agravaine MacLachlan, Michael Newall, Jim Strickland, Kate Stryker
Curator Michael Newall

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
8 June – 1 July

Katrina Simmons

"Desire is about what you want not what you need."
[Calvin Klein television commercial]

Similar to the curatorial premise of the *1998 Biennale of Sydney*, Michael Newall has asked that the artists in this exhibition "make a work which incorporates a practice or discourse – a way of doing things – from everyday life". The resulting works have a spare and difficult quality that perhaps reflects the complexity of the brief.

The collective scrutiny of everyday life has become a phenomenon in its own right, epitomised in the popular media trend towards 'reality TV'. *Big Brother* has provided a kind of 'other world' to millions of viewers who have genuine affection and empathy for its 'characters'. "We love you Sara-Marie!" According to Michael Newall's catalogue, fan cultures enable many people to live a rich life. To a greater or lesser degree this implies *Big Brother* may have the capacity to "sharpen our understanding of the aesthetic qualities of everyday life" equally as well as the works in this exhibition.

Interestingly, there appeared to be an adolescent rite of passage, love/sex theme, happening in some of these works. Jim Strickland's video *Tuesday, June* deserved contemplation as he agonised and mused over the intricacies of a failed relationship. Disclosing unselfconsciously to the viewer as if to a sympathetic friend he describes how, gradually, love sputters, stammers and grinds to a halt, and how it feels to carry out the everyday rituals of living in that awkward embrace of self-doubt and disillusionment. And then you move on. Or life itself moves you on. Maybe while you are eating, sleeping or riding a bike.

Desire too can be a tricky thing and one that Peter Franov, like many of us, appears to find problematic. His large painting *the impossibility of fulfilment/forever wanting* showed sophistication and care. The penetrative/ejaculatory imagery and stylised logos and texts seemed to encapsulate doubt, desire and recrimination all at once,



Maria Bilske, [*Other Worlds* installation detail], 2001 Photo Alan Cruickshank

spotlighting that moment when reason is lost and sensation takes over completely.

Drawing on social and psychosexual games, both these works were able to recognise the points of tension that come with our attempts to negotiate intimacy and communication. This idea also travelled through the work of Chris Chapman. His *Vampire*, consisting of stacked *Lucky Strike* packets on top of a Bret Easton Ellis novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, seemed to hint at a kind of uncontrolled consumption. The work was irritatingly aloof and suggestive at the same time. His *Hiroshi* included a glowing red bedside lamp on the floor, vaguely reminiscent of motel rooms, as was a dangling key pinned above by its length of cord. Placed next to it was a casual snapshot of a man/boy in a room. Conjuring up evidence of a brief but good time?

Other works ranged from the tightly constructed to the whimsical. Kate Stryker's *roadworks* conjoined photographs of street markings and symbols left by unknown workers, while Maria

Bilske's enclosed domes of tiny astronauts remained fixed and unshakeable in their environment. Michael Newall's Lego tableaus weren't as careless as they first appeared, apparently referencing modernist art practice through their childlike forms.

Proffered in the form of simple and sometimes confessional gestures it was often difficult to differentiate the artists' works from their living experiences, as was the case with Matthew Bradley's video. His camera-on-helmet documentation of a lighting tower climb showed an ungainly perspective of the surrounding suburbia. This documentation, along with his helmet and climbing jacket thickly taped to the wall, seemed to reinforce the notion of the subversive act. His 'other world' provides a counterpoint to the banality of everyday tasks. The probable basis of desire. Doing something because you want to.